

Local bocce league sheds old-man image

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STAMFORD - On a cloudy evening last week in Scalzi Park, Marge LoBuglio, 81, rolled a red bocce ball within a few inches of its target, a smaller white ball called a jack or pallino.

Beverly Boginski, 73, cheered LoBuglio on, even though they play for opposing teams in the Stamford Women's Bocce League.

"Good ball, Marge, good ball!"

"Now leave it alone, girls," LoBuglio warned her opponents before sitting back in her green lawn chair.

Sis Davis, 81, watched the game unfold from her chair.

"My daughter Pat roped me in, and then she roped the sisters in and then the granddaughters," Davis said of her seven seasons with the league.



From left, Helen Legato, Fran Pia and Justine LaPolice watch a roll... Chris Prevolos / Staff photo

She has four daughters and five granddaughters who play.

"She has a family reunion every Thursday night," Marie Uhrich, 69, said from her seat across the court.

As the friends, all Stamford residents, played on one of the eight courts at Scalzi, dozens of women in red T-shirts with team names such as DiMare Divas and Bink's Auto Glass tossed and rolled bocce balls in other games to shouts of encouragement, playful taunts and the dull "thwack" of the hard balls bouncing off wooden walls.

It is a scene familiar to anyone who has passed through the park on a Thursday night in the last 25 summers.

Though the league has consistently had about 90 players, recent years have drawn younger players who are carrying on the tradition, players said. Women's bocce in Stamford is becoming intergenerational.

"When I first started, I was probably the 10th youngest. Now I think I'm the third oldest," Boginski



said. Bocce is a centuries-old game developed in Italy and played in various forms throughout Europe. Players or teams bowl the pallino into a designated zone on the court, then take turns trying to land balls as close to it as they can.

"It's one of the few games that a grandparent or grandchild could play together and be on equal terms," said Mario Pagnoni, author of "The Joy of Bocce." "Try that with basketball or hockey."

Tracy Settembrini rolls a bocce ball recently during a league night...
(Chris Preovolos/Staff photo)

Pagnoni, who bills himself as the "voice of bocce," writes an e-mail newsletter out of his home in Methuen, Mass., that reaches 10,000 bocce enthusiasts weekly. Bocce often is thought of as an old man's game, but it is attracting a more diverse and younger crowd, Pagnoni said.

"The average age is still up there, but it's dropping," he said. "One of the problems with the growth of the game was the old-time Italians didn't want the women playing or the little kids playing."

The Stamford Women's Bocce League has worked against exclusionary attitudes. Before the start of play this spring, Patty Franco of Stamford, a 24-year veteran and former president of the league, sought to include fresh faces on the courts. Franco took out an ad in the newspaper and spent three Sundays teaching new players.

"Ten showed up," she said. "I showed them how to play, and six of them joined on the spot."

Franco's sister, Jayne Bakis, 53, also of Stamford, said the league always welcomed newcomers.



"The women in this league are very good. They taught us everything," Bakis said. "First you learn to throw, then you learn strategy."

The PB Bella Dones was one of the new teams on the courts Thursday night. The members are 10 Pitney Bowes employees, nearly all of whom work under the same vice president.

"It was just a bunch of friends at work, and it was just a good opportunity to come have fun," said Tara Berlingo, 28, of Stamford.

The team has struggled with throwing and strategy. But their office has a bocce court, and they plan to practice at work, Berlingo said.

For all the fun, the game can provide tense moments.

"I thought it was going to be more laid back," said Dina Georgiou, 28, of Norwalk, alluding to a team on another court using a measuring tape on a close point.

Though it is her first year playing, PB Bella Dones member Maria Venneri, 38, had a better idea of what to expect.

"I used to come here every Thursday to watch my mother play," she said.

The game is a part of her Italian heritage and often is played at family functions such as birthday parties, Venneri said.

"We're always playing," she said.

Her sister also now plays in the league.



Team members measure the distance from the pallino to a bocce ball...
(Chris Preovolos/Staff photo)

Later in the evening, Venneri's mother, Anna Tamburro, 63, of Stamford, arrived to cheer her daughters on. Tamburro said she played in the league for 10 years but now sticks to the courts at the Settefratense Club on Virgil Street.

She's happy her daughters play.

"They should carry on the tradition," she said.